



News, Views and Careers for All of Higher Education

Sept. 14

## College Flunks Professor Over Test

The [background for three questions](#) that angered many at Bellevue Community College started like this: “Condoleezza holds a watermelon just over the edge of roof of the 300-foot Federal Building, and tosses it up with a velocity of 20 feet per second....”

Forget velocity — the question set off protests at the college, which is near Seattle, and infuriated civil rights groups. While no last name was given, people took the question as a reference to the secretary of state, and combining her name with watermelon was viewed as racist. The professor who wrote the question apologized, and the college’s president and board apologized. But now the college is trying to suspend the professor for a week without pay, and he is challenging the decision as inappropriate.

Peter Ratener, the professor, has appealed to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education for assistance, and that group is now organizing an outcry in response to the college’s response to the outcry Ratener created.

“Given the reaction of the community and the college, one might think Ratener was guilty of committing a serious crime, rather than writing an accidentally offensive math problem,” said Greg Lukianoff, president of FIRE. He called the suspension — which currently is on hold pending appeals by Ratener and the faculty union — “unfair and a violation of the First Amendment.”

The test question that set off the furor actually was given first in 2004, without incident. This year, another professor used the question on a practice test, and a student’s complaint led to widespread publicity and demands for apologies.

Ratener said that he frequently includes celebrity names on his tests, to relieve student tension, and that he has used Bill Clinton and Madonna, among others, in this way. He originally wrote this question with the name [Gallagher, a comedian known for smashing watermelons](#). But when he realized that many of his students wouldn’t know Gallagher, he substituted Condoleezza. He said that name is “a fascinating name to me,” and that race and politics had nothing to do with his choice.

In [an apology](#) he issued — to students, colleagues and Secretary Rice — he said that he still should have realized the potential problem and caught it. “The responsibility is ultimately mine alone,” he wrote. In the

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apology, he talked at length about his sadness and shame at having upset so many people and embarrassed his colleagues. And he repeatedly talked about his commitment to equity and respect for people of all kinds.

The college's investigation of the matter led to a finding that he should be suspended for a week without pay. [The finding](#) noted that in 25 years of teaching at Bellevue, Ratener had never before been accused of racial insensitivity, and that he had apologized for the test question. But the finding also said that Ratener should be held to a high standard as an educator, that he had not attended many of the programs the college offers "regarding cultural issues and the impact of stereotypical thinking on the perpetuation of racism," that the question had damaged the college's reputation, and that it had "created disruption."

A spokesman for the college noted that the college's contract with faculty members includes references to actions that disrupt educational activities. The spokesman said that because there are efforts under way to mediate the conflict and it involved a personnel matter, he didn't want to comment on any of the details. But as to FIRE's statements that the college's punishment violated the First Amendment, the Bellevue spokesman said, "we feel differently."

— [Scott Jaschik](#)

## Comments

### A Different Take Than Most

When I was a student, I would have enjoyed taking such math exams. As a BCC alum, I am, I must confess, a little ashamed that this happened. As an instructor, I applaud his attempt to make the students in his courses feel more at ease. None of this, however, gets to the question of the punishment's quality.

Ratener's *mea culpa* appears to be in earnest, and I think it marks the very least he can do. A week without pay, however, is a troubling punishment, to my mind. BCC has, in its 40 years, always been open to dealing creatively with controversy (it was built with a protest area between the Student Union and what was, in my day, the building that housed the book store and the library). This punishment diminishes, some, my sense of what BCC is in terms of a community, and I hope there might be a more creative solution on the horizon.

The school has an active student government, which is one source of alternative ideas. Perhaps a better solution, however, is to go to the college's All College Council (provided it remains, though I cannot see why it would not), a committee comprised of students, staff, faculty, and administration members (from which any may become the chair). The ACC, on which I served one year, is there to address issues that affect the campus at all levels, and this seems the right kind of issue in which to involve its members.

Decisions such as the one that resulted in this initial penalty make me think of universities, but community colleges, as I see them anyway, should be more open and inclusive when making high-profile decisions that reflect on all members of the campus community.

[Andrew Purvis](#), at 7:25 am EDT on September 14, 2006

### don't use real names

This is why I always use comic book or cartooncharacters when phrasing word problems.

**D Joyner**, Prof at USNA, at 7:30 am EDT on September 14, 2006

## Baffling

The amazing amazing thing about this case is that if the professor had worded the question “Condoleezza holds a stick of dynamite just over the edge of roof of the 1300-foot World Trade Center, and tosses it up with a velocity of 20 feet per second at the instant Dick Cheney presses the button starting a controlled demolition...” he’d probably be a lionized as a hero to cause of academic freedom.

One of the major problems with higher ed today is that it so eager to ignore things truly dangerous while it simultaneously obsesses that which is offensive, yet ultimately harmless.

[Stu Gittelman](#), at 9:20 am EDT on September 14, 2006

## Racist Professor

First as an African American from a very conservative part of the country who struggled to get a higher education I am absolutely appalled but not surprised. I myself have attended at least 8 institutions of higher learning to end up with two bachelor degrees and working towards my masters in education and I am very proud of African Americans like Ms Rice who deserve the utmost respect based on her position in life and her struggles as all African Americans have experienced. This professor should be fired, not just a slapped on the wrist. Comments like this or actions from non African Americans are common place everywhere in America and we as African Americans are always the blunt of bad jokes and racist actions related to mainstream endeavors from professors, managers, companies, universities, etc...Moreover when we as African Americans react we are viewed as racist for reacting.....as if we are not allowed to be proud of accomplishments we have added to America or our proud history in America of fighting for rights. We are disrespected often and must bite our tongue when these type of ‘events’ take place yet we know that having a tough skin will help you though such events. Events like this one happen a lot and we laugh it off or it’s just forgotten. The problem is racism is a learned behavior and when negative images are allowed or negative political cartoonist are inspired by others weakness resentment will build and community power kegs began to erupt leading to more social problems. The professor’s mind set was exposed and he needs help, Ms Rice has accomplished much in the name of female hood and non-white hood for America and those old fashioned negative belief systems he undeniably holds are a thing of America’s shameful past with regards to African Americans. As proof of this I invite all to visit this link that has documented years of this type of unethical behavior from a professor at an institution of higher education.

<http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/>

**Greg Harris**, at 9:20 am EDT on September 14, 2006

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